

By Ltjg. Frank Goertner, USNR

Hitting the Boat

It was a perfect day for a Mediterranean VOD mission: sky clear, sea-state nothing, and an overhead time early enough to get to the ship and back by mid-afternoon. It was my first mission as a fresh PQM in my squadron. I was teamed up with an O-4 HAC; our task was to “hit” an AGF with some random supplies. That verb proved prophetic.

After an uneventful transit to the ship, I surprised myself with a sweet landing to the single aft spot of the AGF. Because of the size of our MH-53E on the deck, the LSE positioned us on touchdown with our nosewheel about eight feet forward of the touchdown circle. Our tail was just over the deck edge, which allowed enough room behind the aircraft to maneuver a forklift on and off the ramp. It also put the LSE and ship’s hangar eight feet closer to me than I had been expecting. “Not a problem,” I thought. I would just be extra-careful to avoid any forward drift on takeoff. Besides, the brakes would be on.

Well, maybe not. While the crew offloaded cargo, we had two uncommanded releases of the brakes. Now, with questionable brakes and an LSE and hangar uncomfortably close, I had to avoid any forward drift. I was concerned but still confident that the takeoff would be no big deal.

Once cleared, I initiated takeoff, cautiously adding a bit more back-stick than usual. After a nose-high lift, the

aircrew told the HAC and me that we had struck and broken our tailskid. Our forward position on the spot had placed the tailskid directly over the deck-edge combing. I had added too much back-stick on takeoff, forcing the skid to hit the combing with enough sideward force to shear one of the supporting struts for the skid and bend several other parts. We set it down, inspected the damage, and flew back home later that evening.

Although internal corrosion in the sheared strut had contributed to its failure, the immediate cause of the accident was my excessive back-stick on takeoff. A rookie mistake, but one that could have been avoided. I had been trying to practice good situational awareness by taking into account our forward deck position and our uncertain brakes, but what I failed to include in my little S.A. calculation was my nugget-ness. My impressive total of five shipboard takeoffs and slightly more than 60 hours in the MH-53E was less than adequate experience for trying to handle an unusual takeoff on my own. I was accompanied by an experienced HAC and two experienced crewmen. Mentioning over ICS before takeoff that I intended to compensate for our situation could have cued the HAC to guard against the excessive back-stick and warned the crew to keep a particularly conservative watch on the tail.

Ltjg. Goertner flies with HC-4.